

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE
McCormick Theological Seminary
October 23, 2007
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Isaiah 58: 6-9 a
Matthew 5: 13-16

A very long time ago, when I was a child, I was sent off, with my little brother, to Daily Vacation Bible School, at the First Baptist Church. In retrospect I now understand what a gift the First Baptist Church gave to my mother: taking us off her hands every morning for two weeks, a kind of blessed easing into summer vacation. We were Presbyterians. There was no Vacation Bible School at our Church. And if there had been, it would not have been nearly as interesting as the show the Baptists put on. They knew how to do Daily Vacation Bible School. The opening assembly featured a song leader, a brass quartet, a testimony or two, during which we heard one of our peers describe how he had been rescued from a life of sin by Jesus - actually the sins were pretty boring - cheating on a test, a little fib, taking back to parents - the most depraved was the boy who used to steal Baby Ruth candy bars from the corner country store "Couldn't resist a Baby Ruth" he said. Nothing like that happened in the Presbyterian Church . . . more songs and then we marched off to class robustly singing "Onward Christian Soldiers. There was a puppet show of the resurrection once - and flannel graphs. I loved those flannel graphs of Peter slowly sinking into the water and Jesus pulling him out - don't ever recall seeing anything like that in my Sunday School. There were scripture memorization contests in which you could unleash your competitive spirit and beat your friends and at the end of the two weeks receive a medal - that bore a striking resemblance to a USMC sharp shooter metal with its row of dangling bars beneath the square pin. At craft time you could burn the cross of Jesus into a piece of soft pine and then paint it gold and take it home for your room, potholders and lanyards.

And the music - in Presbyterian Sunday School the youth hymnal was pretty much like the regular hymnal, a little thinner, with a red - not dark blue cover - and normal print, not old English titles. We sang something about "Following the Gleam," a lot and "Fairest Lord Jesus" which I liked and still do, but it wasn't anything like the Baptists. With the song leader waving his arms, and the pianist whipping up and down the keyboard, and the brass quartet blaring:

"I've got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy, Deep in my heart: Where? Deep in my heart."

"Do Lord, O do Lord, O do remember me. Way beyond the blue."

"If you can't bear the cross, you can't wear the crown."

“What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear.”

And:

“This Little Light of Mine I’m gonna let it shine.
This Little Light of Mine I’m gonna let it shine,
This Little Light of Mine I’m gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, Let it shine, Let it Shine”

The second verse:

“Hide it under a bushel? No! I’m gonna let it shine
Hide it under a bushel? No! I’m gonna let it shine. . .”

Over the years I have come to both appreciate the love the Baptists invested in the effort and to understand its flaws: the biblical literalism, the uncritical piety, the absence of any nuance of sophistication, the incipient philosophic dualism beneath it all — the total absence of a public morality of any kind except liquor. The Baptists were still pining for Prohibition. But I have also come to understand, out of experience, that – that little song – “This Little Light of Mine,” does in fact address the most enduring heresy in the long history of Christianity, namely the notion that in order to follow Jesus faithfully, you need to put some distance between yourself and the world: the resilient, persistent notion that the Christian life is an “other worldly” life.

If you are so inclined you can find Pauline references that seem to support it; if you are carefully selective in your choices: the world is a fallen, corrupt place. In Adam everybody gets painted with the same brush: the flesh is – well flesh: with all its annoying demands and appetite clamoring for attention. The spirit is something else altogether.

Now this is a caricature, but a lot – maybe most people, think like that and construct their own notion of discipleship and their ecclesiology, on the notion that, the world is a dubious place at best. And light – if you have any to shine. It’s better to bring it inside, where it can illuminate and warm the rest of us believers.

Well, the way Matthew tells it, one of the first things Jesus did after he recruited his disciples was take them up on a mountain, sit down in their midst, in the classic posture of a rabbi, and teach them a little about what they just got themselves into.

And the first thing he says to them, Matthew reports, is stunning and radical:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit
Blessed are the meek, the hungry,
the pure in heart, the peacemakers,
the persecuted.”

Those statements are so radical, so counter-intuitive, so absolutely opposite to the way things are in the world, that I’ve always imagined Peter and James and John, and Mary and Martha and whoever else was there, scratching their heads and thinking “Blessed are the poor – happy – meek – persecuted – not in this world. Maybe some other world – or maybe some place in this world apart, isolated, walled off, cloistered – we get it! He wants to start monasteries! Places where we won’t have to worry about all those worldly matters that occupy and obsess people ‘til the day they die: food, hunger, desire, sex; paying bills, making love, being married, having babies. A safe, secure – “other world” in miniature where you can be poor in spirit and meek and gentle and peaceful to your heart’s content and nobody gets hurt or is inconvenienced.

Now – I do not mean to make light of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and monasticism and its profound contribution to Western civilization. I mean only to suggest that the first and most normal human response to the Beatitudes is to look for a monastery – unless you risk reading on. Because the next thing he says is: “Go public. Come out with it. You are salt of the earth. You are light of the world. Let your light shine.”

Salt does not exist for itself: doesn’t even taste very good until it is put on something, but for what it does when it shines in some kind of darkness and then just a little light is pretty dramatic.

The currently fashionable interest in, almost obsession with, spirituality is evidence of a deep hunger in the human heart. The shelves at Borders and Barnes & Noble are full of books about it – self-help books, books about meditating and praying, journaling, walking the labyrinth and books about the success and wealth and health God wants you to have. I heard Peter Gomes suggest recently that while the entire spirituality business is indicative of something important happening in the heart of our culture, the challenge it poses is the temptation to a new consumer driven monasticism.

The Gospel mandate is that the Christian life is to be lived out in the world. And the Gospel promise is that when you do that you become the man or woman God created you to be. You find your life, he said, by losing it.

And there is a word here for the church, “I’m leaving, Reverend: your sermons are too political. I didn’t come here for that. I can read the newspapers.” . . . “I’m leaving the Presbyterian Church – because of what it

has said about the environment, about Israel and Palestine, about human sexuality, about health care and the war and torture and social security, about economic justice and criminal justice, about race and gender.

Jesus said: “we exist for the sake of the world. Not for our own sake: our health, our financial security, our growth – are not the issues. The world is the issue. I do not suggest irresponsibility. I am the pastor of a church that must tend to business if it expects to be around next year: every church does. But it is my job – and yours – to remind ourselves and one another – that we exist for the world God so desperately loves: that ultimately our survival is not the issue: the world is: our job description is simple and straightforward — figuring out a way to become salt and light.

A final personal word: This profession can get to us, sooner or later. Being a pastor is a prescription for burnout, Barbara Brown Taylor said and then left. What if I don’t have any light? What if the batteries are dead and the fuel all gone?

I’m not powerful, I’m not the CEO of a major corporation, President of a bank, prominent politician. If I were, I’d shine some light. But I’m not. What possible light can I shine on anything? Who among us, regardless of who we are and where we are, hasn’t thought like that?

I’m going to suggest that the light Jesus wants you and me to shine is whatever it is that burns deeply inside us. I think he put it there - a place of bright light , a place of deep caring and passion, a place of strong love and courage.

Each of us, I have come to believe, has light to shine. Sometimes that’s hard to believe: but no harder than it was for them: Mary, Martha, Peter, Andrew, James – standing around him, as he talked about blessings — or “true happiness,” which is really what the word means —shifting their weight from one foot to the other - with all their self doubts, and weaknesses, misgivings, and their failures and infidelities and betrayals - the light of the world.

It is whatever burns brightly in your heart:

- your troubled conscience about the way children are treated by the juvenile justice system
- your dis-ease at 40 million Americans without health insurance
- your discomfort with the fact of starvation in a world of abundance
- your anger that your government is torturing people and lying to you about it and nobody seems to care
- and it may be the love that burns deeply in your heart for your spouse, your partner, your children, for God’s beautiful world, for justice and God’s dream of a peaceful creation

-your love for poetry and art and music and for God

Let it shine, because when you do – God will be glorified.

When I've about concluded that not only don't I have much light to offer – the darkness seems to be gaining on the light – a conclusion I'm tempted to reach after reading the morning paper – I go to my office and turn on the computer and check my emails.

Every morning, there is one from Sammie, a Bible verse, a reflective thought: some pretty sappy, some pretty good. But every night, I assume, Sammie finds or picks something and sends it out and around to his friends, which given what Sammie has to contend with, is remarkable.

A youngish, middle-aged African-American man, Sammie is in a wheel chair that he operates with his finger tips – which is all he can move. Sammie has severe muscular dystrophy and is mostly paralyzed and everything he does, all day long, is a major challenge — getting out of bed, grooming, going to the bathroom, putting on clothing, eating.

He's there, at church every Sunday: is delivered and picked up by a PACE bus which itself is a major ordeal. He is unfailingly pleasant, smiles, always says "Jesus loves you" or "Have a blessed day" as he passes by after worship.

Sammie's morning messages which he sends out and shares with his friends, and his ministers because he apparently knows we need them more than anybody, included recently:

"Be ye strong therefore, and let not your hands be weak: for your work shall be rewarded" (II Chronicles 15) – which got my attention because it has been years since Sammie has been able to use his hands.

On a cold, dark February morning earlier this year: "Be kinder than necessary, for everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle. Jesus loves you." And most recently, Sammie shared a little Norman Vincent Peale: "May the deep inner strength of God's power help you to see your problems clearly, meet them calmly, and solve them correctly."

Sammie reminds me that the friends of Jesus are the light of the world. He reminds me about what a sorry thing it is to be healthy and whole and strong and full of passion and untried courage and to be afraid, afraid to let my light shine.

Sammie reminds me of the critical mass of men and women and children that gather in our sanctuaries on Sunday morning and all the love

and justice and redemption and compassion and healing that could and occasionally does happen when Jesus comes and looks all of us in the eye and says –

“You are the light of the world: let your light shine.”

“This little light of mine I’m gonna let it shine.”